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It is the rare string quartet that does not eventually undergo a change in personnel. But the acclaimed Artemis Quartet, which started performing professionally in 1994, lost two players last year, each unexpectedly.

This Berlin quartet is thriving again, as it made excitingly clear in its performance at the New York Society for Ethical Culture on Wednesday night, which was presented by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Still, last year the quartet was in crisis.

First the violinist Volker Jacobsen left because of family obligations. After extensive auditions to find a replacement, the search came down to two strong finalists. Then another of the original players, the violinist Heime Müller quit because of a disorder in his left hand, diagnosed as focal dystonia.

Suddenly the Artemis Quartet was down to two players: the violinist Natalia Prischepenko and the cellist Eckart Runge. It turned out, though, that one of the finalists for the viola position, Gregor Sigl, was also an exceptional violinist. So with the other finalist, Friedemann Weigle, as the violist, and Mr. Sigl playing violin, the Artemis Quartet was back.



And is it ever. A quartet cannot change two players without undergoing some shift in character. But I was struck on Wednesday by the similarities between the Artemis's old and new selves.

The Artemis has always played with vigor, brilliance and sensitivity. More than that, its performances have had clarity of conception and unfussy directness. All these qualities were abundant on this occasion.

Beethoven's Quartet in C minor (Op. 18, No. 4) came across in this incisive and full-bodied performance as the audacious work of a supremely confident young man, especially in a moody menuetto, thick with slinky chromatic lines and wayward harmonies. The finale is a breathless rondo with Turkish flair, Turkish music having been the rage in Vienna at the time.

The concert ended with Tchaikovsky's Quartet No. 2 in F. A popular conception of Tchaikovsky casts him as an overtly Romantic composer, but the Artemis's dynamic performance of this teeming piece made a case for Tchaikovsky as a master of elusiveness. The account of the

Scherzo, for example, kept you off guard with its shifting duple and triple meters, and chords that shun being pinned down by tonality.

The discovery on the program was a quartet from 1989 by Nikolai Kapustin, a Russian composer born in 1937 and largely unknown in the West. In a charming spoken introduction Mr. Runge told the audience how he had chanced upon a recording of Mr. Kapustin's rhapsodic piano works. This self-effacing composer proved so hard to track down that Mr. Runge thought "he must be a phantom," he said. At the time Mr. Kapustin was making his living by playing piano in a big-band jazz orchestra.

Though Mr. Kapustin resists the label "jazz composer," his music is drenched in jazz. The idiom is transformed, and the rhythms are fractured, and whole stretches of music are entwined with knotty, wayward counterpoint.

Giving audiences engaging spoken introductions to new works was another hallmark of the original Artemis Quartet. The tradition continues.